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Monster Radiation in Changing Times and Environments: A Case Study of the Australian Bunyip

Philip Weinstein  & Mark Koolmatrrie

Abstract

In response to a wish from a group of Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray River and Lakes, South Australia, we have documented their current and historical understandings of the Bunyip, a water spirit traditionally believed to be found throughout the temperate reaches of the Murray River system in south-eastern Australia. Through participant observation, we determine that current Ngarrindjeri understandings of the Bunyip differ significantly from historical descriptions of the being. We conceptualize these and other different forms of the Bunyip as constituting diversification from an ancestral being, or ‘evolutionary radiation’. It is in this context that we focus on the environmental (social, cultural, and historical) changes that have shaped Bunyip traditions since European colonization, and in discussing these, draw on theorizations from both monster studies and monster anthropology.

Introduction: Real Monsters Evolve

The traditional Bunyip is a monster of Aboriginal Australia, and was integral to the worldview of the people who believed in it. It was both dangerous (because it killed people) and vulnerable (because of the ephemeral nature of its habitat). Following European colonization, this Bunyip differentiated into (at least) three different types: the *Mulyawonk* that is still believed to inhabit Ngarrindjeri Country; an extinct cryptid that was struck from the zoological record when natural historians and explorers failed to find physical evidence for it; and a symbolic ‘European’ Bunyip that features in children’s books and conservation material. We use the case study of the Bunyip to formalize the concept of *monster radiation*: the diversification from a common ancestor of a number of descendant forms that occupy a variety of different habitats. We propose ‘radiation’ be added to the list established by Yasmine Musharbash and Geir-Henning Presterudstuen (2020) of ways in which monsters

change, affecting the way they interact with people and the environments that they share.

Although the traditional Bunyip has been referred to by various names along the waterways of south-eastern Australia, it interacted with people in similar ways and its various names are generally accepted to represent a single water spirit throughout the temperate reaches of the Murray River system (Clarke 2018). To one broad community of Aboriginal people, the Ngarrindjeri of the Lower Murray and Lakes, South Australia, it was and is still known as Mulyawonk; it is one group of Ngarrindjeri's understanding of the being that provides the ethnographic fieldwork component of this article. However, much of their traditional knowledge of the Mulyawonk has been lost, and it was the wish of one of their Elders, co-author Mark Koolmatrie, to document current understandings of the being before that knowledge is further eroded. In addition, there was a wish in the community to relearn some of that lost knowledge, given that it had been captured, at least in part, by the writings of earlier anthropologists who had worked with the Ngarrindjeri. Those writings, containing 'the voices of our ancestors', are not readily accessible to members of the community, but could become so with the assistance of a researcher such as the first author, Philip Weinstein. This situation incited a collaboration that aimed both to capture current understandings of the Mulyawonk through participant-observer fieldwork, and to repatriate historically recorded knowledge of the being to the community through research—with perhaps a 'dimension of recognition and reconciliation' (Merlan 2014, 303). This article captures the knowledge created, upon which user-friendly versions of that documented knowledge can then be based, including pamphlets to be made available at local schools and in the community's historical museum at Raukkan, South Australia.

In undertaking this work, it became apparent that the historical information recorded about the pre-colonization Bunyip represented a being distinctly different from the Mulyawonk as it is currently understood by the collaborating group of Ngarrindjeri. It is as though the latter had evolved from the former under the influence of changing environmental and societal circumstances. Further, conceptualizations of additional forms of the Bunyip emerged from the research, including a cryptid sought by early settlers and naturalists as yet another Australian animal new to science, and an appropriated Bunyip found in children's storybooks and conservation organizations' iconography. The existence of such a multiplicity of derived forms of the original or ancestral Bunyip is consistent with the evolutionary phenomenon of radiation: the diversification from a common ancestor of a number of descendant forms that occupy a variety of different habitats. It is within such a framework of 'evolutionary radiation' that we position the results of the fieldwork and research requested by the Ngarrindjeri interlocutors, at the same time contributing an additional concept to our understanding of the concept of change in monster theory.

The Bunyip is a 'monster' in a broad use of the term, which commonly encompasses mythical beings, cryptids, ghosts, magical animals, and other beings with supernatural powers, following the inclusive terminology of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996), Stephen Asma (2009), Yasmine Musharbash (2014a), Samantha Hurn (2017), and others. A

monster is a being with the ability to act in the world, and to be acted upon (Musharbash 2014a; Hurn 2017), but it ‘is not bound by classificatory structurations’ (Cohen 1996, ix). Importantly, its interactions with other beings occur in the world that the monster inhabits, a world in which it and other actors are all real. Within such worlds, monsters are integral to the ‘biodiversity’ of the environments that they inhabit, and influence, both directly and indirectly, the well-being of the human populations that share those environments. The Bunyip is part of Aboriginal culture and healthy Country,¹ serving as a key element of modern Ngarrindjeri identity (Clarke 2018). The Bunyip ‘is essential to our well-being’ (pers. comm., Merv, a Ngarrindjeri Elder, December 2020).²

For humans living in and dependent upon physical and spiritual environments, monsters embody a means of understanding, explaining, and interacting with the observed environment and the natural phenomena that take place therein. Sometimes, but not always, they also provide guidance on how to avoid hazards presented by such environments. Monsters interact with both people and the environment that they share. Aspects of monster–people–environment interactions can be interpreted variously as encompassing identity, religion, safety, health, resource management, and other characteristics of culture. Monsters are also beings that represent ‘the ultimate incorporation of our anxieties—about history, about identity, about our very humanity’ (Cohen 1996, xii). They provide a means of talking about society and the environment in which they exist; they send moral messages, encoding relations between human groups and between human groups and their environments; they mark liminality and transition, and reflect the issues that most matter to the people for whom they are real (Musharbash 2014a; Ellen 2017). Clearly, though, the issues that most matter to people change with time, with the environment, and through contact with other cultures. It is in this context that we explore how monster traditions and monster habitats can undergo evolutionary radiation, using the Bunyip as a case study.

Cohen (1996) describes how the cultural elements of time, geography, body, and technology become incorporated into the formation of monsters. As a result, different environments are associated with different monsters: for example, in the remote and harsh environments of Iceland, people live with the ice giants of Norse mythology, and associate the fiery Surtr monster with volcanic activity (Mutz 1979–80). Such monsters contrast with the Bunyips that share more conducive environments with Aboriginal people along the rich, temperate waters of the lower River Murray. The nature of Country ‘determines not only the form a monster takes, but also its *modus operandi*’ (Nicholls 2020, 91). As these social and environmental drivers of monster formation change, so will the monsters themselves (Asma 2009). Musharbash and Presterudstuen (2020) describe monster emergence, adaptation, appropriation, amalgamation, extinction, and succession all as changes in real beings in their respective worlds, and the chapter authors contributing to their edited book provide living examples of such changes.

It is important to examine monster change in apposite settings that take account of the different and evolving worlds that monsters share with ‘their’ people; that is,

to understand monster change not in terms of changing perspectives of the same world, but with an acceptance of the existence of different worlds (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). In Australian Aboriginal cosmologies, landforms, spirits, and humans generally have complementarity in ‘a continual, atemporal metaphysical reality’ (Hume 2000, 126), a relationship that Katie Glaskin describes as encompassing ‘not just people, but places, species, and ancestral beings; it is a relationship between persons and places regarded as consubstantial, and that has consequences for how people, and people and country, are linked through space and time’ (Glaskin 2012, 298). In Aboriginal cosmologies, monsters are not necessarily ‘other’ as suggested by Cohen (1996); rather, they are integral to particular Aboriginal cultural worlds and ‘are of country’ (Thurman 2014, 34). It is in these different worlds that monsters like the Bunyip not only dwell, but change, adapt, and even disappear, as those worlds too undergo change. Monsters emerge differently in different cultural contexts, and adapt to the particular needs, fears, and anxieties of the people they haunt. The Bunyip of pre-European Aboriginal cultures is different from the Bunyip as currently understood by our group of Ngarridjeri interlocutors, which is different from the ‘cryptid’ Bunyip once pursued by early European natural historians, which is different again from the Bunyip of pan-Australian popular culture (Nicholls 2020; Quirk 2023). In the present article, we examine these different Buniyps as an example of monster radiation, starting with the ancestral form of pre-colonial Bunyip, and moving through the derivate forms of present Mulyawonk, extinct cryptid Bunyip, and an appropriated European form.

The Pre-Colonial Bunyip and its Habitat

The best evidence we have for how Buniyps were thought of before European contact comes from the early literature where European explorers, settlers, and scientists documented what they could glean of the monster from their Aboriginal informants. These understandings and stories have been recently reviewed by Philip Clarke (2018) in the context of Aboriginal biocultural knowledge. The English word Bunyip is derived from *banib* in the Wemba Wemba language of Western Victoria, and despite the many regional names used for it—including Mulyawonk by the Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray and Lakes—generally it is accepted to refer to the same water spirit found throughout the temperate reaches of the Murray River system (Clarke 2018). There are analogous water spirits from elsewhere in south-eastern Australia (Mountford 1978). Early descriptions are very varied, and include aspects or amalgams of starfish, emu, platypus, alligator, seal, water rat, dugong, and bittern (the ‘Bunyip bird’, which has a strange, booming call) (Norman 1951; Clarke 2007; Clarke 2018).³ Reported sizes are also quite discrepant, with estimates ranging from a smallish 150 pounds (seventy kilograms) (see Archival Sources [Tindale 1930–52]; Clarke 1999) to a huge twelve or thirteen feet (about four metres) (Clarke 2018, 44). On the one hand, this variability is not surprising for a monster, with most monsters demonstrating hybrid bodies that ‘can be imagined by combining or extending shapes that exist in the world’ (Musharbash 2014a, 8). On the other hand, it is

surprising, because Aboriginal Australians were intimately familiar with the local fauna of their Country, and it would seem unlikely that they would misinterpret sightings of what were to them a range of familiar animals. One possible explanation might lie in their use of aspects of known animals to satisfy the persistent enquiries of Europeans seeking scientific explanations; another might lie in an unwillingness to accurately describe the Bunyip out of fear (Holden and Holden 2001). As a central character in regional Aboriginal creation mythology, the Bunyip was aggressive (it had attacked Bunjil the Wedge-Tailed Eagle Ancestor and it tore holes in Ngurunderi's fishing nets), and was greatly feared—likely to the point of not wishing to risk incurring its wrath by describing it to people who were not of Country.

In terms of Bunyip behaviour and interaction with people, something can also be distilled from early European writers, including that Bunyips dwell in relatively quiet inland waters, lay eggs like a turtle's in a platypus-like nest, and eat small crustaceans as well as—on occasion—people (Norman 1951; Clarke 2018). They are attracted by the smell of fish and duck grease, especially when children are washing their hands in the water after a meal (Berndt, Berndt, and Stanton 1993). One of the reasons they were difficult to see was their amphibious nature, only coming onto land to bask on the riverbanks on very hot days and slipping quietly back into the water at the slightest disturbance. This traditional Bunyip is clearly dangerous, but also vulnerable because of the ephemeral nature of its habitat. Although temperate in climate, south-eastern Australia has highly variable rainfall and is subject to prolonged droughts that often produce key environmental challenges to local lifeforms (SEAC 1996). Historically, the River Murray and its billabongs (oxbows) experienced irregular floods and droughts that altered riparian habitats dramatically. Despite often producing resource gluts, floods could be lethal for people foraging and fishing in inland waters; droughts could have equally adverse effects through their negative impact on the availability of plants and animals for subsistence. Such environmental unpredictability would likely have been top of the list of anxieties for people living in and around Bunyip habitat. As a monster embodying people's anxieties (Cohen 1996), the Bunyip is associated with the safe and sustainable human use of physical and spiritual environmental resources: respecting and interacting appropriately with the Bunyip would support human well-being as well as healthy Country.

Primary drivers of human health are an absence of hunger, feeling safe, and preserving a state of physical and spiritual well-being; cultural warnings against any threat to maintaining such a state may include monsters and their messages. Clarke interprets Bunyip behaviour as a consistent threat to children who have strayed too close to the water's edge: 'All reports of Mulyawonk reinforce it as a symbol of the dangerous nature of the waters in the Lower Lakes and Murray River region' (Clarke 2018, 39). Tindale and Pretty (1980) record the Mulyawonk as living near Wellington, South Australia, where the waters of the Murray that exit into Lake Alexandrina are particularly treacherous. In the course of fieldwork near this area, at Poltalloch Station on the Coorong, the first author witnessed the ephemeral and perilous nature of this area first-hand: the waters changed from calm and sunny to extremely choppy and windy in the blink of an eye. Clearly, swimming, fishing, foraging, and/or

recreating in any water body can be dangerous to a poor swimmer (such as a child), and in unpredictably turbulent or cold waters particularly so. Bunyips are reputed to have eaten people and to have been attracted to the smell of food near water, both of which are aspects of their natural history that would be consistent with warning children away from waters where they might risk drowning. For the beings of Country to provide lessons in hazard avoidance is not unusual; for example, the threat of the Pangkarlangu monster of the Warlpiri people of Central Australia, which is known to cook and eat children, is mitigated by means of regular after-dinner ‘play’ sessions devoted to teaching children Pangkarlangu-avoidant behaviour (Musharbash 2016; Nicholls 2020). This learning contributes to keeping children safe, not in this case from water, but from a lack of it: getting lost in the Tanami desert.

In addition to water safety, the availability of a sustainable food supply would also have been high on Aboriginal people’s list of concerns and anxieties. Bunyips by their presence limit access to fishing and the collection of waterbird eggs, an aspect of sustainable resource use captured by an author writing as ‘Oedipus’ as ‘deliberately frightening the youngsters ... to prevent them from stealing the eggs of wild fowl whose haunts were usually identical to those of the fabled bunyip’ (Oedipus 1870, 5). Indigenous peoples dependent on hunting and gathering often impose seasonal or numerical limits on natural resource exploitation, so as to ensure sustainability of supply (see, for example, Maori *rahui*—a *tapu* [taboo] approach to restricting access to limited resources—discussed by Maxwell and Penetito 2007). The limitations on harvesting imposed by Bunyips can be interpreted in this context as sustainable resource utilization, illustrating another aspect of beneficial monster–human interactions.

The Present Mulyawonk of a Group of Ngarrindjeri People

In 2020 and 2021, the first author, Philip Weinstein, learned about a group of Ngarrindjeri people’s current understandings of the Bunyip—the Mulyawonk—as a participant observer with a Ngarrindjeri community broadly associated with the Koolmatrie family, around the Lower Murray in South Australia. The second author, Mark Koolmatrie, a Ngarrindjeri Elder and *Munkanboli* (Man of Wisdom), facilitated this work in addition to acting as an interlocutor himself. He grew up with his older brother and sister on an Aboriginal-run community farm near the Point McLeay Mission (now Raukkan), on the shores of Lake Alexandrina in the heart of Mulyawonk country. My interlocutors included members of the last generation of people with lived experience of—including first-hand contact with—the Mulyawonk.

‘It is in the form of a hairy man waiting in the water to grab you It was waiting to grab you to take you to its cave underwater’ (pers. comm., Jim, a Ngarrindjeri Elder, December 2020). Sometimes it was described as being covered in seaweed, or having claws, and it had very big eyes. Jim, now an ageing Ngarrindjeri Elder, was in a boat with an outboard motor on the river and saw what he thought was a shark alongside, in weeds. However, when he ‘looked up close, two big eyes looked back at me’. He described the size of the eyes as being the size of small dinner plates. ‘They were blinking at me.’ His kinsman Karl said contemplatively that ‘the

beak and eyes get me', adding later, 'but there are so many versions'. On a different occasion, a younger local described sometimes 'hearing him at night, "Raahh"'. The suggestion of a being the size of a shark was at one end of a broad range of possible sizes, the other end being more the size of a whale, visible in the river from the bridge at Murray Bridge. These descriptions are not inconsistent with those recorded for the traditional Aboriginal Bunyip, especially given the broad variety of these and the fact that 'nobody knows what the Mulyawonk looks like' with certainty (pers. comm., Jim, December 2020).

In addition to these direct sightings, there was plenty of corroborative, indirect evidence reflecting the nature, location, and behaviour of the Mulyawonk:

[We] saw bubbles in the water, that was Mulyawonk, when seen as kids, ran away fast ... [When] growing up [we] lived by water, both of the sea and the lakes and the river, surrounded by water, Lakes Albert and Alexandrina, and Murray River and Great Southern Ocean. We went swimming but we were not allowed to go out far, our parents *scared the hell out of us and we still do the same to our kids*. [You] can tell when parents' voice changes that there is danger, and then listen and pay attention, what's in there? (Nina, a retired Ngarrindjeri lady with grandchildren; our italics)

Ollie, the eldest of several Ngarrindjeri brothers, described an indirect encounter as 'the scariest event in my life'. His younger brother, then aged about nineteen, was canoeing in the lake with a friend, watched by Ollie from a hilltop. The latter was warning the younger men not to go too far, and when the canoe tipped, he froze with the thought 'what will happen next?' with the full expectation of witnessing the loss of these young men to the Mulyawonk. The men in the water did sidestroke with the canoe until they could safely touch the bottom, but Ollie was left permanently scarred by what in his lived experience was a moment of intense fear equivalent to a 'close encounter with the Mulyawonk'. To this day, when people drown in the Lower Lakes, the local people say 'the Mulyawonk got him!'⁴

Direct interactions with the Mulyawonk were reported only by members of the older generation, and it was apparent that there had been an erosion in the importance and awareness of it in younger Ngarrindjeri living off Country, away from the river or lake. Knowledge of the Mulyawonk has become generationally stratified: 'The old are scared, the young have never heard of it, and the in-betweens have a vague awareness', said Betty, a teacher at a local primary school. Paul, one such 'in-between', described living in two worlds: when his mates, who were fishing near the bridge at Murray Bridge, saw one of a group of pelicans suddenly get pulled under the water and disappear ('woosh, slurp!'), he intuitively thought 'Mulyawonk!', until he found himself attempting to then rationalize the event with some other explanation. Joan, a younger Ngarrindjeri woman with toddlers, said she that had no knowledge of the Mulyawonk, but that she hoped to bridge this gap in her own understanding and ensure that the next generation had the opportunity to gain this knowledge. 'I want my kids to know more than I did', she stated. Betty had students draw Bunyips as a means of maintaining the cross-generational transmission of an awareness of, and understanding of the importance of, the Mulyawonk.

The warnings and messages that the Mulyawonk provided were clear enough in terms of personal safety (drowning) and sustainable resource utilization (conservation),

and these could still be passed on at community, family, or school opportunities. Only one Elder, since deceased, provided information about the greater morality and laws also embedded in the Mulyawonk. He recounted how his father had explained that many years ago a Ngarrindjeri man went to another Nation, and interfered with a woman of another skin (tribe). He clarified by specifying Milang, on the other side of a line drawn up from Raukkan through the middle of Lake Alexandrina, with the Ngarrindjeri on the eastern side—tracing a map in the dirt with a stick. The man was punished, cursed, to ‘never see daylight again’, and became the Mulyawonk, only able to come out at night to find ‘whatever he was looking for, for food’. Several interlocutors expressed an awareness of a sense of loss around the value of the Mulyawonk, suggesting that the original Bunyip was much ‘bigger’ than the one currently conceived. It made a positive contribution to parts of Country, particularly waterways, by ‘looking after and protecting the environment’. This is a similar role to that of the Ngarrindjeri *Ngaitji* (animal totem), with each person having the responsibility to look after theirs, resulting in a collectively balanced and sustainable approach to caring for and managing the ecosystem (Cahir, Clark, and Clarke 2018). The Mulyawonk was ‘a giver, not just a taker’ (pers. comm., Joe, artist, July 2021), but has been distorted by history.

The Extinct Cryptid Bunyip

The pre-colonization Bunyip was part of the natural biodiversity of Country, acted upon that world and its people, and was acted upon by them; and thereby contributed to the well-being of both people and environment. Early European explorers, settlers, and naturalists came from a different world and interpreted their new environment and its biodiversity—including the Bunyip—differently. The Bunyip was new to them, but the adoption of culturally foreign monsters is not without precedent (Musharbash and Presterudstuen 2020; Nicholls 2020; Quirk 2023). It was thus that Europeans accepted the Bunyip as real and set out to learn more about it. The first recorded European sighting of a Bunyip was that by William Buckley, a convict who escaped to live with the Wauthaurang people near what is now Melbourne for three decades from 1803 (Morgan 1980). His description was of an animal the ‘size of a fully grown calf, having a back (the only part that he could see) with ‘feathers of dusky grey colour’ (Morgan 1980, 56). It is difficult to believe that he would not have already been influenced by Aboriginal understandings of the Bunyip, and the varied descriptions of them that were provided to Europeans. Many other settlers, even if without such direct Aboriginal contact, would have had reason to adopt Aboriginal conceptions of the Bunyip indirectly: they needed to believe in a culturally available script to explain strange happenings in a new land (Holden and Holden 2001; Clarke 2018). The importance of such explanations in appeasing the settler psyche is apparent in Australian literature, where ‘[m]ysterious experiences in the bush remain a stock theme of the Australian Gothic’ (Gelder 2007, 121). Aboriginal knowledge of Bunyips—or at least selective parts thereof—was adopted by settlers, many of whom thereby came to fear Bunyips as human-eating monsters. However, even among Europeans there was

disagreement: natural historians and scientists had quite different socio-economic backgrounds and levels of education to most of the convicts and farmers who made up the early European population. Natural historians and explorers were in search of new animals in new places, and were quick to seek physical evidence of this new creature—they were, in a sense, what we would now call cryptozoologists: people who seek evidence for the existence of unconfirmed animals (Hurn 2017). To them, the Bunyip represented an unknown animal that could be discovered by science, being already familiar with the idea of strange animal discoveries in Australia (including our iconic and abundant kangaroos, and the chimaeric platypus⁵). They saw no reason why Bunyips could not represent yet another such animal, but attempts to obtain physical evidence of a Bunyip nevertheless failed. One of the most promising leads was an alleged specimen of a skull acquired and displayed by the Sydney Museum, but it was deemed by other European experts to represent no more than the mangled remains of a deformed, hydrocephalic foal (Clark 2018; Edmonds 2018; Quirk 2023, 119–20). The lack of concrete evidence of Bunyips soon led European scholars to abandon the idea of discovering a new animal, but the possibility that Bunyip stories represented memories of a long extinct species lingered longer, well into the twentieth century. Tindale (1951) sought to show a link to rock engravings of extinct megafauna tens of thousands of years old, on the premise that Aboriginal traditions and mythology would have been influenced by extinct animals that shared the ancestral landscape with the creators of that art. Although the possibility of such influences cannot be ruled out, anthropologists generally support alternative explanations, as is succinctly summarized by Clarke:

[T]he link between long extinct species and Aboriginal Creation ancestors is tenuous. In the narratives of the Creation period all animals were bigger and more powerful before events took place that caused the ancestors to travel to the Skyworld, leaving smaller versions of them on Earth. The meanings within Aboriginal mythologies are complex, and not easily equated with an Indigenous form of history ... For non-Indigenous people, the risk of specific information imported from Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge being rendered invalid is high when the worldview of the knowledge-holders has not been taken into consideration. (Clarke 2018, 51–52)

Failing to prove the existence of Bunyips, European scientists required an alternative explanation for Bunyip sightings, which came in the form of alleged misinterpretations of sightings of known species or other natural phenomena. Before barrages were completed across the lower Murray in 1940, seasonal river flow was much higher and more seasonally variable. Phenomena such as floating islands of vegetation torn from the banks, and incursions of marine animals such as seals, sharks, and even small whales, were not uncommon. These explanations would be consistent with a strictly scientific worldview, and in effect put paid to the existence of a physical Bunyip: the ‘Bunyip as cryptid’ had a brief existence, and quickly went extinct.

Ironically, Bunyips provided both traditional and novel sets of warnings and messages to European settlers and natural historians. The fear of Bunyips adopted by settlers could be seen as providing some of the same survival benefits that they did in the Aboriginal worldview; dangerous waterways posed a risk to Aboriginal people

and Europeans alike. A good illustration is the struggles of the captain with the barge *Crowie* near Swan Reach on the Murray River in about 1938; he either struck a sandbank or was held back by the locally resident Bunyip, depending on who was reporting on the incident (Roberts et al. 2017). By sharing traditional knowledge with local Aboriginal people along the Murray, navigation, swimming, and recreation could be made safer by avoiding Bunyip habitats. As for natural historians and explorers, their *raison d'être* is discovery; so, in an ironic twist, the Bunyip offered opportunities for novel human-monster interaction with these Europeans in the form of providing motivation, hope, belief, and excitement in a new country that would in many ways have been challenging and dangerous to their occupation. The fact that the Bunyip did not make itself apparent to these scientists could be explained, in a different worldview, by the fact that they were not of Country and of no interest to the Bunyip. Such situations are known to occur with other Aboriginal monsters: when Joanne Thurman undertook research in Litchfield National Park (Northern Territory), she was able to collect GPS data from sacred sites that members of the local Aboriginal group Mak Mak Marranunggu could not access because the sites were protected by 'cave men'.⁶ These monsters did not present themselves to her, but would have viewed her interlocutors differently, and posed a significant danger to them (Thurman 2014).

The Symbolic Modern 'European' Bunyip

Much as social and environmental changes led to the development of the Mulyawonk 'descendant' as currently understood by my interlocutors, continued cultural contact and historical change also affected the ways in which Europeans adopted or appropriated the changing Aboriginal Bunyip. This 'European' Bunyip is a transformed being that has become more of a benign creature without fierce teeth or claws, now featured in children's stories that often convey European moralities rather than attempting to explain strange environmental phenomena in a new land, as did the early settler stories. A new Bunyip has developed, a being that appositely fits the 'Monster Mash' label that Christine Nicholls (2020) attributes to Aboriginal monsters that have been co-opted into the mainstream. The modern European Bunyip has become an Australian cultural icon and symbol of national identity and history, driven in part by the mid-twentieth-century academics who 'actively recorded Aboriginal explanations of the past as a means of building an Indigenous foundation myth for Australia as a nation' (Clarke 2023, 14). Despite also becoming a tourist attraction (see Figure 1), the 'European' Bunyip, like most monsters, still carries moral messages and warnings (Musharbash 2014a; Ellen 2017). *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* (Wagner 1973) provides a perfect example, largely targeting children to develop a positive self-image and accept themselves as they are. In this story, a Bunyip is on a journey of self-discovery, asking others what he looks like, and does not receive terribly positive feedback; however, he finds satisfaction in what he is by means of a mirror, and even befriends a lady Bunyip.



Figure 1. The Mulyawonk as popular culture, in its cage, by the waterfront at Murray Bridge, South Australia, 2019. Photograph by Jessica Stanhope (used with permission).

The symbolic Bunyip can act as a first introduction to Aboriginal culture for some. As a child in Sweden, reading Colin Thiele's *Gloop: The Gloomy Bunyip* (1962) provided the first author with an early exposure both to the mythology of a different culture and to an environmental message that was arguably well ahead of its time. This Bunyip warned of the destruction of nature through pollution, foreshadowing current extinctions and biodiversity loss. The modern 'European' Bunyip is now a conservation icon, with Bazza the Bunyip enlisted by the Victoria government to engage communities in the sustainable management of the increasingly fragile Murray waterways—a monster ironically recruited to help conserve and restore its own altered habitat.⁷ At Yundi Nature Conservancy on the Fleurieu Peninsula, South Australia, the Ngarrindjeri Mulyawonk has become a focal point for restoring its own altered habitat, the Fleurieu swamps. Here, however, restoration has a meaning broader than ecological restoration, and includes Walking on Country cultural experiences led by Traditional Owners, helping to connect and to reconnect people to Country (Figure 2). 'Swamp areas create mystique, and also theatre—for teaching environmental lessons to Aboriginal children historically, and tourists on tours in the present' (pers. comm., Jack, Indigenous part-time tour operator, January 2021).

Repatriating a Descendant Mulyawonk

With this article, we have done two things. Firstly, we have documented for a group of Ngarrindjeri people their current understandings of the Mulyawonk, in response



Figure 2. Traditional welcome at a cultural walking tour of Yundi Nature Conservancy, South Australia, 2021. Photograph by Nicole Motteux (used with permission).

to their concern that their knowledge of the being was eroding and should ideally be captured for future generations. It is our intention to translate our academic writing into a community-friendly brochure for local use by teachers, visitors, and younger members of the community, to help capture and (re)release some of their traditional knowledge about their local Bunyip: a small contribution to ‘repatriating knowledge’. Secondly, we have explored a new contextualization of change in monsters, their habitat, and their interactions with the people who believe in them, through a case study of the Australian Bunyip. We suggest that the social, cultural, and historical changes that have affected the Bunyip since European colonization have produced at least three different ‘descendant’ Bunyips. First, there is the Bunyip as currently conceived by a group of Ngarrindjeri people, the Mulyawonk, likely an example of several such beings; then, there is an extinct ‘cryptid’ Bunyip earlier pursued by European scientist; and finally, a symbolic modern ‘European’ Bunyip that dwells in Australia’s popular culture. Borrowing from biology, we refer to the differentiation of these forms as monster radiation, defined, by analogy with biological species radiation, as the diversification from a common ancestor of a number of descendant monsters that occupy a variety of different habitats (Freeman and Herron 2007). Monster radiation can be added to the list of ways in which monsters affect, experience, and herald change—emergence, adaptation, appropriation, amalgamation, extinction, and succession—as established by Musharbash and Presterudstuen (2020). Here, we have contextualized monster radiation in terms of monster theory, but note the clear parallels with variation and adaptation in legend transmission in response to social

context and change. The advent of the digital age provides an apt example, with direct influences both on monsters (the Kurdaitcha [Jarnpa] monster of the Warlpiri people in Australia's Northern Territory now stalks them on Facebook; Musharbash 2014b), and on the generation and transmission of online legends (Peck 2023).

In this research, interlocutors were keen to share knowledge, because with the discontinuation of ceremonies, most of 'our traditions of passing on knowledge have been lost', and there was often a feeling that the Mulyawonk was 'no longer viewed positively, its role has been lost' (Merv, December 2020). The being clearly persists, though, and the very retention of its local name reaffirms that it still forms part of Ngarrindjeri biocultural knowledge, albeit that such knowledge is continually under threat of erosion and loss. In documenting the current understandings of the Mulyawonk in this community, we hope we have helped to capture at least some knowledge in a way that could be passed on to future generations in the absence of ceremony, and contribute to a 'basis for identity and self-esteem' (pers. comm., Jane, teacher, May 2021). With European colonization, Aboriginal people throughout south-eastern Australia underwent social change in the form of sedentization, urbanization, loss of language, and other changes. The effects of such dramatic social change continue to this day, and include a lessening of importance of warnings and messages from monsters, such as protection from drowning and sustainable resource use—in this case partly as a result of the introduction of motorized watercraft, and partly due to the centralization of food distribution systems. With the changing importance of their warnings and messages comes changed understandings of the monsters themselves, and people tend to become less familiar with them and less confident in how to deal with them; knowledge becomes more dependent on 'what the old people told us' than on people's own lived experience (Thurman 2014, 32). This point was illustrated by the generational change in Mulyawonk 'presence'. At the same time, this being was taking up new roles in maintaining or rediscovering a sense of identity, territoriality, belonging to Country, and traditional ownership. An intricate local knowledge of the places that Bunyips occur(red) (such as specific water holes in riverbeds, or whirlpools), recorded in oral history, suggests a clear territoriality of Bunyips and 'their' people, contributing to Aboriginal identity-building by strengthening and demonstrating connections to the local landscape (Clarke 2018). Such a sense of identifying with Country was clear in the case of one Elder who was proud to offer to take us down the river to see 'all the spots where the Mulyawonk lives today'. Unfortunately, with his recent passing, most of this information is now likely lost. We hope that our work, like that of many greater researchers before us, will contribute in some small part to maintaining Ngarrindjeri connections to Country, helping promote the value of cultural assets, and advancing our understanding of monsters.

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Notes

¹ Aboriginal Australians have a strong spiritual and cultural connection to the lands and waterways that they traditionally inhabit, a relationship that is captured in shorthand by the capitalized word ‘Country’.

² Not his real name. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

³ Alligators (more correctly crocodiles) and dugong do not occur (and have never occurred) in the Murray–Darling system, being tropical in distribution. It is unlikely that knowledge of these animals persisted from migrations of Aboriginal people from the north tens of thousands of years earlier; it is equally unlikely that there was familiarity with them through pre-European trade routes. It is more likely that they represent European misinterpretations of locally available and well-known animals such as lace monitors and seals.

⁴ In late 2020, during our fieldwork for this article, two men in an inflatable canoe, one aged thirty-one and the other nineteen, got into trouble in Lake Alexandrina, capsizing. The nineteen-year-old was rescued and treated for hypothermia, and the thirty-one-year-old’s body was found in reeds six days later, on 3 December (Brice 2020). People at Raukkan were, at that time, saying ‘The Mulyawonk got him!’.

⁵ The first specimen of a platypus to be examined by European scientists was thought to be a hoax, sewn together from parts of different animals to provide a saleable item for collectors. In that context, and with the discrepant descriptions of the Bunyip, it is interesting that Norman Tindale mentions the platypus as a possible Bunyip (see Archival Sources [Tindale 1930–52]).

⁶ One of the pantheon of Mak Mak Marranunggu monsters, also known as Nugabig (Thurman 2014).

⁷ See, for example, ‘Bazza the Bunyip Says “Don’t Muck Up the Murray!”’, *Discover Murray River*, <http://www.murrayriver.com.au/bazza-the-bunyip/> (accessed 7 June 2020).

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